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FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1247
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ATHENS 000239

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV NATO MK GR

SUBJECT: GREECE/MACEDONIA: GREEKS READY TO ENGAGE ON
NIMETZ PROPOSAL

REF: A. ATHENS 231

1B. ATHENS 205

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel V. Speckhard for 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

11. (S) Greek name negotiator Vassilakis reported that Athens will work from the most recent Nimetz proposal as a basis for negotiations, but will seek changes to it. PM Karamanlis and FM Bakoyannis emphasized to Nimetz that Greece will "engage seriously" as now is the time to resolve this issue. Greece still believed in a universal solution but Vassilakis believed that there may be some give along the lines of an "external" versus "internal" usage divide. As far as the choice of names was concerned, only the last in the Nimetz list was acceptable (Republic of Upper Macedonia), as Greece believed only a geographic qualifier conveyed the true sense that this country was only one part of a broader region that could claim Macedonian heritage.

12. (S) Opposition parties continued to criticize government handling of the issue, underlining the Government's limited room for maneuver. FM Bakoyannis has been active in public making clear that the Government will defend Greece's interests, but refusing to go into the details of the proposal or make any categorical statements; Bakoyannis has also briefed leaders of Greek's political parties. Characteristically reflecting and amplifying the debate, the Greek media have begun another intensive round of analysis and commentary, with influential "To Vima" printing the Nimetz proposal in full. Yet, from our perspective, the Greek Government appears to be more willing to stay in the Nimetz process than we would have predicted. Embassy continues to press all in Athens to support the Nimetz negotiations and avoid public pronouncements on restrictions that would further limit the opportunity to find a solution acceptable to both sides. End Summary.

Vassilakis -- Greece Willing to Engage

13. (S) Vassilakis met 2/20 with Ambassador Speckhard and DCM and said that Greece will engage on the most recent Nimetz proposal, noting "there will be no yes and no no." FM Bakoyannis had told Nimetz that Greece will seek greater clarity on the "scope" of the proposal before agreeing to it, but that Greece would engage fully as "the time to solve the issue is now." Vassilakis identified such issues as the name used on passports, plaques on front of Embassies, etc. as the sort of detail to be clarified. We noted that this is exactly what should be negotiated between the sides under Nimetz' auspices. Surprisingly, he did not raise the

Government position expounded by FM Bakoyannis in advance to her trip to Washington that Greece cannot accept anything other than a "universal solution" (ref B) and suggested that issue of "external" versus "internal" usage was more important than what the Macedonians called themselves.

¶4. (S) Vassilakis said FM Bakoyannis and PM Karamanlis told Nimetz that Greece needs a geographic qualifier in the new name to ensure that it reflected the fact that this country was only a part of the broader Macedonian geography and heritage. The Ambassador and DCM emphasized to Vassilakis that Greece should not lock itself into a limited range of possibilities but let Nimetz try to find acceptable compromises.

¶5. (S) Vassilakis emphasized that Bakoyannis is consulting "very closely" with Karamanlis on the minutia of this issue, including clearing Vassilakis' anodyne public statement after the 2/19 talks. Vassilakis said he thought Dora was being very brave and potentially committing "political suicide" but that she was determined to push for a solution in the face of the enormous risk to her career.

¶6. (S) Nimitz had invited them to come to New York for negotiations for February 27-29 or March 3-5. Vassilakis was certain that for the March 6 NATO Ministerial, the Foreign Minister would not be in a position to support Macedonia's accession. While we could still hope that a result would be achieved by the Summit, he still believed the odds were less than 50 percent that a solution would be found in time to avoid a veto.

Media Reaction

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¶7. (SBU) Nimetz' latest proposal, two days on, is now being analyzed in detail in the media, dominating other news from Kosovo, Cyprus, and beyond. Virtually all media outlets have reported (accurately) on Nimetz' proposed five names; this morning influential "To Vima" printed the entire Nimetz proposal. Many commentators continue to express discomfort with the concept of a "dual name." Some see "traps" in the proposal, such as a suggestion that the name "Macedonia" can only be used by Greece for commercial purposes. Most have welcomed suggestions that Macedonian passports use the new international name. Most commentators appear to believe that the two sides are too far apart to come to closure prior to the April NATO Summit, and many still call for Greece to block a NATO invitation absent an agreement on a universal change that includes the Macedonian constitution. However, independent "Kathimerini" is still urging that Greeks "grow up" and "avoid populism" in foreign policy matters. Even left-leaning "Ethnos" suggested reserving judgment on the Nimetz proposal in today's lead editorial.

¶8. (C) The chief editor of "To Vima" told us this morning that the paper had printed the full Nimetz proposal "because we are journalists." He added that PASOK officials had confirmed to him that they had come out in favor of a veto even before being briefed on the proposal "to deny Karamanlis any electoral boost." The leak prompted chief Greek government spokesman Roussopoulos to declare it against Greece's interests during his regular daily briefing.

Opposition Criticism

¶9. (SBU) Seizing on public skepticism and interest, the opposition has ratcheted up criticism of the government's handling of the issue. Main opposition party PASOK leader George Papandreou said that he could not accept a "dual solution" insisting that Macedonia's constitutional name must

change or there must be a veto. Communist Party (KKE) leader Aleka Papariga said a composite name is acceptable but must define Macedonia "geographically, or else there may be an issue of border changes." Seeing a chance to criticize ruling New Democracy and former ruling party PASOK, the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) leader Tsipras told the press this situation is the result of "15 years of erroneous tactics in Greek foreign policy." Finally, far-right party LAOS President Karatzaferis called for Greece to hold a referendum on any eventual agreement.

Government Public Response

¶10. (SBU) FM Bakoyannis has been front-and-center on the issue, making various public comments to the effect that Greece seeks a partnership with Macedonia (ref A), and that the government will not give away Greek vital interests. She has refused to go into the specifics of the proposal or the Government's reaction/likely proposed changes to it. Echoing his boss, MFA Spokesman Koumoutsakos told the press, "There are certain points the Government can accept, some others it cannot, and some more on which it will submit its observations. I won't say any more."

Comment: Exceeds Expectations

¶11. (S) Given that the Nimetz proposal specifically rejects the concept of "universal usage," the Government's reaction to the proposal has been as good as we could have hoped for. Although the proposal certainly contains elements the Greeks cannot accept, they appear to have taken on board advice that they not reject the proposal out of hand and engage with Macedonia under Nimetz' auspices. Furthermore, in contrast to past practice, the Government appears ready to seek such changes through negotiations rather than through public airing of differences or a public assertion of redlines, even in the face of typically intense media scrutiny and opposition criticism.

¶12. (S) Given New Democracy's one-vote majority in the Parliament, and the fact that many New Democracy MPs privately share the concerns being expressed by the opposition, the Government's room for maneuver is very limited. PASOK, the main opposition party, is only making matters worse by tapping public sentiment and insisting that

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a veto is the only possible course unless the Macedonian constitution is changed to reflect a composite name. At the same time, Dora is masterfully working within her own party and across party lines to try to shape a debate that will allow her to find more room for negotiations while not shouldering all the responsibilities for a potential compromise. End Comment.

SPECKHARD